



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

FEBRUARY, 1904

THE BASIS FOR A PARENTS' ASSOCIATION.¹

I CONFESS to a feeling of bewilderment when I attempt to state to myself the duties and privileges of a parents' association. I know that I am not alone in this feeling, although there have been parents' associations before this, and though two such organizations have been taken up into this one. For, however admirable these organizations have been, they have not yet succeeded in making plain to the plain parent the exact function of these bodies. This is not said by way of criticism of anybody. I am in much too humble a mind to be critical. I am merely trying to voice the ignorance which most of us would have to express if asked for a definite statement of the ground of our being here in the capacity of a parents' association.

This bewilderment, like Gaul, may be divided into three parts: first, that inspired by the old school; then, that due to this school; and, finally, that with which the child oppresses us, when we conscientiously try to face our responsibilities to him.

The school used to be a thing apart. It stood in an isolation that was guarded by traditions as old, many of them, as our modern world. Its business was to grind information into the child, and perfect him in the simple methods of dealing with words and figures. It had its own methods for doing this, that were directed by a class apart, which wanted no assistance from the home, provided the pedagogue was clothed with sufficient

¹ An address delivered by the president of the School of Education Parents' Association, Chicago, December 17, 1903.

authority by the community. The school, however, stood for something else beside the three R's. It was an institution within which the child was to learn obedience to the sovereign state that had placed him within the school and subjected him to the ferule of the teacher. It was the gateway to the power that came with knowledge, and the child's introduction to a social institution that stood outside of and transcended his home.

The parent's attitude to this institution was and remains today a very contradictory one. He cherishes it as the proudest heritage from his fathers, the characteristic thing in American society, that which educational commissions come over from the other side of the water to examine, and which seems such a very curious thing to them when they get the school under their eyes. As a general thing, the parent supports it generously out of his pocket, and supports it against the world, and even against his own children.

But, on the other hand, he is a merciless critic. He abuses the school and its board and its teachers. Of course, a great deal of this curious combination of attitudes can be explained by the peculiarity of man's nature, that is constitutionally "agin" the government and all its works—the very government which he has helped to constitute, and for which he is willing to give his life. Psychologically, one is not apt to exaggerate the relief to the mind which is obtained by criticism, and a free people will be the last to surrender the right thereto. It stands to reason, furthermore, that an institution which, like the school, stands apart, with the sign displayed upon it "Hands Off," necessarily makes itself a mark for such criticism.

However, this critical attitude is something different from that which men hold toward their government. Criticism has become the method of government. Representative government by means of parties is nothing but a government by discussion, or by, what is the same thing, mutual criticism, in which Robert's rules take the place of the noble marquis's. But there is no organic place provided for the parent's criticism of the school. It is not subject to any rules, and is therefore wild and uncontrolled. The school is not governed by mutually destructive criti-

cisms; it is merely harassed by it. It is governed by itself, in accordance with the tasks which it has undertaken. It is true that enormous advance has resulted from even this uncontrolled criticism, but the progress has taken place inside of the school, when it had to recognize a pressure that had become unavoidable. The public that made the criticism and was responsible for the change did not help to work out the change nor feel the responsibility of the criticism. With reference to the school, the parent has had the misfortune which belongs to a perpetual opposition—the misfortune of making continual attacks and never facing the responsibility of the reconstruction which the attacks imply. It is inevitable that the attitude of the parent under these circumstances should fall under these two contradictory heads: either that of support *contra mundum*, or that of uncontrolled, and frequently of unedifying, criticism. Experience has shown that changes take place when an unusually big row has taken place; and the moral is, if you want a change to take place, make your row big enough. It is not the particulars of your attack that count—they belong to the pedagogic experts; you won't be admitted to that discussion anyway, and your judgment would be thrown out of court if you were. Confine your efforts to making the present situation unendurable, and leave to the doctors and dominies the expert task of getting out of the difficulties that you have succeeded in creating. When there are two sides to the question, as there normally are, there result two rows on opposite sides. For example, we abuse the school for its arid methods and abstract subject-matter. "In the midst of a modern world it remains in a cloistered mediævalism. Our children's minds are dried up. They come nowhere in the course into contact with reality. The school has become a great machine for grinding in the cheapest and most trivial parts of our culture, while the essential things are wholly omitted, not to mention the unnatural method of controlling the child's mind and conduct." When, in response to this popular demand, manual training, and cooking, and sewing, and clay-modeling are introduced, an opposing uproar is raised over the money spent on the "fads and frills" of education, and the three R's become at once the solid foundation

upon which alone successful endeavor can be built, and the school the place where this must be laid.

From the standpoint of this public school, the duties of the parent are to provide children for the school and the means of conducting it. His privilege is that of the uncontrolled criticism of the daily press and the political campaign. It seems to me that the exercise of these duties and privileges is a somewhat bewildering program for a parents' association. It may be suggested that the parent may come in from this outside position with reference to the school, and that by means of a parents' association; that he may familiarize himself with the problems of the school, and speak as one having authority and not as the daily-press scribes. There are two things that occur to me to say to this. Most of us are not able or willing to make of ourselves pedagogical experts, who could speak with authority on the questions of curricula and school methods *per se*. We are fundamentally interested in our children's education and experiences in school, but that interest does not make pedagogical experts of us; nor is it possible nor desirable that it should. If the mere fact of intelligent and consecrated interest in our children's welfare in the school does not put us into any other relation to the school than that of a tax-paying electorate, if it can do no more than add acid to the ink when we write to the papers under the caption of "outraged parents," then there is no especial *raison d'être* for a parents' association. The second thing, I wish to say to this suggestion, is that it is only in part that the pedagogical expert decides such questions as manual training *versus* the fad and frill, the parents accomplish results in no small part by stirring up the political waters in which others beside themselves may fish. If a body of parents knew what they wanted in the average public school, they would stand a better chance of getting it by making a political organization of their association than by becoming pedagogical experts; and that would be as illegitimate as the other would be unpractical. To sum this up: If the intellectual life of the school is without connection with the home, the school's organization, its theory and practice, will be independent of the home, and the school's financial and political

dependence upon the home does not make the proper basis for a parents' association.

The implication of what has been said is that the proper basis for a parents' association is the natural interest which people have in the life and development of their children. While this cannot be used to make pedagogical experts out of people, it is actually the basis for a great deal more than half of the average child's education. There is no need of repeating the commonplaces about the influence of the home upon the child. It is true that most of these commonplaces have to do with the heart rather than with the head. I have heard an educator maintain at some length that the character was to be formed in the home and that the intellect was to be trained in the school. Still it is getting to be increasingly difficult to distinguish between character and intellect, especially in their training, and the training of the mind in its narrower sense is felt to be generally dependent in no calculable degree upon the more intimate environment of the family. This training is not going to be directed by any conscious pedagogical theories, but it is going on, and is aiding or thwarting that which is taking place in the school all the time. What is wanted is a school in which, in some fashion, the social life of the home may be a part of the life of the school. The vital connection between the school and the home must be social. I do not mean that this relation should not be the ground for most serious thought; but that the home ought to be related to the school, in some real sense a part of it, simply because the children are members of each organization, not because the parents are politically responsible for the existence of the school, nor because they have educational theories.

There is another current conception of the connection between school and home which seems to be as unreal as the others are unpractical. The school may undertake to be the whole thing. It may be assumed that a judicious combination of sweet smiles and potted plants, and the homely arts of cooking, carpentering, serving luncheons, gardening, and sewing, can be used to provide, not only the means and lubricants for school work, but also an ideal home atmosphere. The home, then, should go to school

along with the children, and get inspiration, and incidentally learn to carry on the work of the school in the house. In this case the home is, of course, the mother. There is no doubt that home and school have learned and will learn a great deal from each other, but this mutual helpfulness has not served in any way to deprive either of them of its individuality. Neither the school nor the home can sit at the feet of the other, and mere adventures of groups of parents into the school for purposes of observation and edification do not offer any essential reason for the existence of a parents' association.

The school to which we send our children has undertaken to leave the attitude of the institution apart, and to take the same view of the children which belongs to a normal home. While it must be more conscious of the methods that it uses in instruction than the home can well be, it hopes to recognize the intellect and interests of the children as they actually are. It has therefore abandoned the privilege of being a law unto itself, and, though its methods call for the pedagogical expert, its results are open to the criticism of the plain man. But it remains true, here as elsewhere, that criticism without responsibility is uncontrolled and unprofitable. And I am myself bewildered when I attempt to state what this responsibility is and how it is to be exercised.

I do not see how the school can accomplish what it undertakes, unless it has relations with the family, which is the habitat of the child; and yet, as the child advances from the kindergarten to the higher grades, the demands of the curriculum constantly increase, and the tendency to restrict the view of the school to the child's scholastic achievements grows. It becomes increasingly difficult to take into account the social environment of which the child is a part. As far as I can see, the school cannot go to the family. The home must go to the school. But we cannot go as scholars, nor yet as mere observers, if the relation between us and the school is to be a vital one. I do not know that the situation is made any easier by the fact that the problem is so far from solution from the standpoint of either the school or the home.

This brings up the third ground for bewilderment—the

whole question of our duties to our children. I have, of course, no intention of adventuring upon this troubled sea. I merely wish to point out that the presence of our children in this school, and our presence as members of this parents' association, carry with them the privilege, and therefore the duty, of identifying ourselves with more of the life of our children. I take it that parents who send their children to a boarding school in some sense shift from their shoulders the responsibility for the immediate social environment of their children, and gain the advantage, which is sometimes a questionable one, of making the school and the home of the child one, and thus breaking down this middle wall of separation of which we have spoken. Now, if this school succeed, it must accomplish in a more normal fashion what the boarding school attempts. But we are unable to put the responsibility for the success solely upon the school. If we wish to keep our children at home, and wish further to have them go to school, and finally to have the whole life of the child all of a piece, as it is in a fashion in the boarding school, we have at least to relate ourselves as much to the work of the school as the home life of the boarding school does to its scholastic life. If this can be accomplished, I suppose that no one will deny that the result must be as much more admirable than that which is attained in the boarding school as the home is a more admirable place for the child than the boarding house.

Out of the vagueness of the situation so much seems to me sufficiently definite: that in the ultimate solution of the educational problem the home will have as essential a part as the school; that in working out the problem the school and the home stand upon the same level, each representing one phase in the child's whole life; that the common ground that they have between them is the social consciousness of the child, which this school undertakes to make the basis of its training, and which is the very content of the home life; that the relation between the parents and this school is not one that has to be manufactured, but one that needs only to be recognized and allowed to develop. It is, however, more difficult to recognize something that has in the past escaped us than to manufacture something out of whole cloth; for the recognition

involves a change of attitude. It would be much simpler and easier to construct an artificial program of an interchange of civilities and mutual criticisms between the home and the school than it will be to make ourselves realize the common, everyday relations between the home and the school, which are taken for granted, and therefore ignored. There is, on the other side, an advantage in this fact that the relation already exists and does not have to be constructed. It makes very little difference with what we begin, and there is no necessary prescribed order for our continuance.

If, however, we are to realize and emphasize the common ground between the home and the school—the social consciousness of our children—we must be able to follow them into the school, and comprehend there what we feel we need of the methods and principles of the school; and we must have some organ by which we can react back upon the social life of the school. For these purposes the constitution provides for two committees—an educational committee and a home committee. It is the function of the first of these committees to enable the parent to follow his children into the school, without interfering with the school work, and to become acquainted with what is essential for his comprehension. It will be the function of the other committee to bring out and emphasize what is common and needs further development in the mutual life of the home and the school. There is a social committee, to take charge of the gatherings together of parents and teachers and children. There is a finance committee, that will enable us to put our hands to the wheel, if any specific occasion arises that commends itself to us. These are, however, all but organs which imply activities, but cannot create them. They are means which we may use, but they are not congressional committees whose reports we may receive and merely accept or reject. They are not there to report on conditions and make recommendations for our action. They are the simplest devices that could be presented to enable the home and the school to get together, and in the end to live the life that is common between them.

It has been indicated above that if this relationship actually

exist between the home and the school, it makes no difference at what point or points we undertake to become conscious of it. I shall be excused, then, if I present without order some of the situations in which the home and the school are dealing with the same problems, and where, therefore, they should be conscious of their mutual activities in a common life.

The physical being of the child permits of no discriminations between life in one place and another. His health belongs to all his comings-in and goings-out. It is natural, then, that about children's diseases the home and the school should come closer together, or at least earlier together, than elsewhere. Mutual precautions against the spread of contagion, mutual conscientiousness in protecting the lives of others, can arise only when the connection between the house and the schoolhouse is made by interrelation that is even closer than postal-card reports. Day by day we learn more of the possible control which we might exercise, not only over the course of disease, but over its appearance at all. It is absolutely certain that the existence of a very large part, if not all, of contagious disease is due simply to the isolation in which certain parts of the community are able to encase themselves—isolated milk and tailoring industries, isolated transportation undertakings, isolated homes and isolated schools. The separation of the people and the mutuality of interests is the reverse side of the shield in every case of epidemics. From the standpoint of health the quickening of a common consciousness is the most important practical step that can possibly take place.

There is another phase of the matter of health which seems to me peculiarly fitted for consideration from the standpoint of the common life of the school and the home. I refer to the instruction which our children get, or do not get, upon the subject of reproduction, and the various experiences, ranging all the way from the healthful to the pathological, that are generally referred to as belonging to the age of puberty. In the large amount of discussion, necessary and unnecessary, upon this stage in children's development very little has been said upon the unnatural separation in the child's life between the home and that dominated by the school. I would venture to affirm that a cordial and

intelligent common attitude and reaction to these questions by the home and the school would eliminate 99 per cent. of the whole problem.

In the whole question of the relation of the child to those about him, and the morality that depends upon it, it is a contradiction in terms to assume that normal training can take place from any other standpoint than that of the common social life that belongs to both family and schoolroom. I can but refer to the large number of activities, which used to belong to the home, that played so large a part in real education of the child, and which now must be replaced in some way in the school. The picture of them is vividly drawn in Mr. Dewey's *School and Society*. I merely wish to point out that the readjustment cannot be made entirely in the school. It implies an interaction of the child's school and his society.

In closing, I wish to point out that this great and admirable building in which our children's school is housed presents opportunities for organizing the social life of not only the younger, but the older children, that I think we have hardly realized. Its gymnasium, its lunch-room, its art-rooms, make it conceivable that the building may become a center for the co-ordinating of the social life of the older children that presents so many difficulties. If we can gather the outside life of our children in a large degree about the school, and enter into intimate relations with it, the ground would be cleared for dealing with questions that are almost hopelessly baffling at present.

I have merely attempted to suggest a few points at which the recognition of the common ground between the home and the school must be of incalculable benefit to them both, and therefore to the child. I hope that, as concrete suggestions, they may give further content to my thesis that the basis for a parents' association must be found in the common social life of the school and the home.

GEORGE H. MEAD.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO,
Department of Philosophy.